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OPENING STATEMENT OF
THE HONORABLE JOHN M. McHUGH
MWR PANEL MARKUP

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The purpose of today's hearing is to markup the Morale, Welfare, and Recreation Panel's portion of H.R. 3616, the National Defense Authorization Act for 1999.

Before I get into a discussion of the mark, I want to thank the Panel's ranking Democrat, Marty Meehan of Massachusetts, for his cooperation and invaluable input to this legislation. Indeed, I should thank all Panel members for their attention and help this year. Our hearings were informative and well attended. Many of you came to me with ideas for the mark, and I have tried to accommodate as many of your suggestions as possible. We heard extensive testimony this year on the importance of the resale system to the military community, and as a group, the Panel was inspired with creative ideas to protect and enhance the system.

We heard much testimony about the plan to return funding of the Defense Commissary Agency to the military services. Many members of the Panel, and some from industry, have expressed concern about this plan, and for good reason. We still have no detail on how this funding mechanism will work. Because the commissary benefit is too important to be left to the uncertainties of service operations and maintenance funding, which even now is seriously depleted because of operations in Bosnia and the Persian Gulf, I have included a provision that would prohibit devolvement.

Last year, the Panel asked for a report on black marketing in Korea. The report was unresponsive. Follow up correspondence has proven what I long suspected. Overseas commanders are operating without oversight in this area, and are sorely in need of direction. To that end, we have included a provision that would direct the Secretary of Defense to exercise more careful oversight of ration control measures, and would place some limits on his authority to impose restrictions on purchases of US made goods by authorized patrons.

All members, indeed all Americans, appreciate the dedication of members of the reserve and National Guard. They are often called to duty on short notice, whether to be deployed to Bosnia or help clean up after a hurricane or ice storm. I believe, and my colleagues on the Panel agreed, that it is time to increase commissary access for reservists. In that regard, the Chairman's mark would double the benefit, to 24 visits a year, and provide commissary privileges for National Guardsmen who are called to duty for Federally declared disasters.

Lastly, we have asked the Secretary of Defense to survey commissary patrons about their interest in having beer and wine sold in commissary stores. The Panel recognizes that there are strongly held views on both sides of this issue, and recommends a provision that would require the Secretary to conduct a survey, and authorizes him to conduct a demonstration project to determine the overall impact on the MWR and resale systems of selling beer and wine in commissary stores.

Overall, I am pleased to offer this mark to our colleagues. I believe the provisions we have crafted go a long way towards accomplishing our objective of protecting and enhancing the benefit.